

THE IMPORTANCE OF MAY DAY TO AUSTRALIAN ANARCHISTS*

«The time will come when mankind will look back upon the execution of the anarchists as we of this day look back upon the burning of the witches in New England»

(Ex-US Senator Trumbull at the 1887 funeral of the Haymarket Martyrs)

The Melbourne Anarchist Club

On May 1, 1886, Fred Upham from Rhode Island, Usa and the Australian born Andrade brothers, David and William, called into existence the Melbourne Anarchist Club (MAC). This, the first formal anarchist organisation in Australia, reflected the Boston Anarchist Club's approach to strategy and philosophy, having a Secretary, a chairperson, speakers' rules and prepared papers. It was also a response to a call in 1884 by the Federation of Organised Trades and Labor Unions of the US and Canada, for a celebration of the day, May 1, 1886, as an expression of international working class solidarity. The significance of this date, May 1, in Australia has escaped professional historians but Upham and the two Andrades, who «called» the Club into existence on that day by meeting with three others could not have predicted what was to follow, the coincidence of the Club's establishment with the series of events known as the Haymarket Affair, the impact of which, even in far-off Australia, was great.

Newspapers

Though some of the turmoil in mainland European countries in the 1870s and 1880s involving anarchist/socialists and attendant an-

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revolutionary attitudes had dribbled into English language media, the 1886 Chicago events were immediately available to the English speaking world, to which especially strident and bigoted news organisations, the emergent Hearst network for example, conveyed it. In Australia, from their beginnings, the large circulation dailies have provided almost all the information on which «the public» bases its definitions of desirable behaviours. In the case of the post-Haymarket debate, contrary and pro-anarchist information and argument had initially to be provided by new outlets which duly appeared but in very small print runs, only to be weakened by a too-energetic debate over principles and personality disputes, or suppressed by status-quo influence. Even when better established channels like the *Bulletin* began to see through the subterfuge, the imbalance of forces was still too great.

The first mention of the Haymarket affair in Australian papers was via publication of identically inaccurate cables on 6 and 7 May in all dailies with international content. These cables were not concerned to single out anarchist involvement. On May 10 the first editorials appeared:

«It would be an injustice to the cause of labour to represent the riot and bloodshed... [in the Usa] ...as the natural and legitimate outcome of the system of combination which labour has in late times adopted as its great hope against the absolute dictation of capital... the violent measures into which those engaged in a movement, lawful and laudable in itself have been betrayed, have not infrequently alienated public sympathy and thrown back for a long time the cause that those measures were intended to forward». (*Advertiser*, Adelaide, 10 May 1886).

The *Sydney Morning Herald* in reporting a European labour event made a similar point, but much more bluntly:

«The disturbances in Belgium are quieting down after fearful excesses on the part of the strikers, or rather the bands of anarchists, convicts, social democrats, thieves and the scum of the populace who joined what were at first legal demonstrations and converted them into a saturnalia of riot, incendiarism and rapine». (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 May 1886).

On May 6, editorialising the US «labour riots» which preceded Haymarket, the *Globe* gushed on «Happy Australia» thus: «It is for the Australian artisan to remember that through the ballot-box he controls the country...». The day before it had reported a proces-

sion of Sidney unemployed to interview the Governor. Reports from other parts of the country indicate hundreds of unemployed prepared to labour «for almost nothing». The editor of *The Liberator* — the journal of the Australasian Secular Association published in Melbourne — Joseph Symes, wrote with a perceptiveness that was not to last:

«Newspapers' may write down the poor, soldiers may be called out to shoot the agitators, advanced or anarchic newspapers' may be seized... what then? Their sufferings will add fuel to the fire and only hasten on the final victory». (*The Liberator*, 16 May 1886).

On the day this Symes editorial appeared the first advertised Melbourne Anarchist Club Meeting occurred. A brief but accurate report of that meeting in the *Age* (Melbourne) of May 17, provoking the *Herald* (also Melbourne) to do an outrageous «beat-up». The *Herald* insisted that the Club's aim was «to hoist a species of social "black flag", order in a supply of red-caps and go on a rampage». Certain sensitive secularists called on Symes to repudiate the Club which he then did in the exaggerated language in which he specialised:

«...the name [Anarchist Club] is one the grimmest jokes conceivable... Rather despotism... anarchy means no rule at all, a dissolution of society». (*The Liberator*, 23 May 1886).

Cashing in on the tense post-Haymarket atmosphere was a sixty-nine page booklet produced in Melbourne, titled *Anarchy!* and subtitled *The Dance of Death in the Gaol Yard — The Final Act in the Greatest Tragedy of the Age* (1888). Perhaps aimed at an imported pamphlet the Melbourne Anarchist Club was selling on the *Anarchist Trial at Chicago*, it hysterically misrepresented the Haymarket events, with total blame being put on those hanged or jailed. Showing the spreading effect of this kind of distortion, a letter headed «Land for the People» to the *Shearers Record* in April 1888 began: «Sir: In reference to the above heading I hurry up to state that I am not an Anarchist, Communist or Nihilist, as some of your readers may imagine to be the case».

From 1886 to the 1890s

In the first years after 1886, May 1st was not celebrated, either as was originally intended, or to remind people of the sequence of events of which that first process was a part. The battle was still rag-

ing and there was not time for nostalgia. When protest meetings were called about the Haymarket, November 11 was the day used. From 1887 in Australia May 1 was remembered and celebrated only by anarchists associated with the Melbourne Anarchist Club, and they were not always scrupulous about it. In 1890 a Club reunion for example was held in July.

However, the Haymarket events were remembered with demonstrations and solidarity meetings until well into the twentieth century and portraits of those hanged adorned the walls of many reform organisations, not just anarchists.

«With one possible exception the trial of the eight Chicago anarchists is the most dramatic in all labour history».

So wrote Ernie Lane, brother of the better known William Lane, but who was another personally radicalised by the Haymarket events and involved in the struggle that followed over the next decade in eastern Australia.

The struggle of course, was for a sharing of power, if possible for a totally new arrangement of power based on decentralisation and federation. The struggle took various forms. In Australia civil war was close on many occasions. May Day as a gathering symbol for radicals re-emerged in 1890, again in Melbourne first of all.

In that year, a mixed collection of reformers met on the 1st May in the rooms of Dr. William Maloney, M. P., and passed resolutions of a general eight hours and labour solidarity kind. «Chummy» Fleming appears to have been one of the initiators but the meeting and the group was not noticeably anarchist. A similar event appears to have occurred in 1891, but this was vastly overshadowed by that held in 1892.

May Day 1892

At that meeting, initiated and chaired by him as the first open air May Day meeting in Melbourne, «Chummy» moved a resolution thanking the National Association of the Patriotic League and the Employers Union for «the valuable revolutionary and democratic work» they had done during recent Victorian and Queensland elections by moving to exclude thousands of working men from the electoral rolls. He saw these attempts as argument for «universal labour federation and national co-operation». The first resolution, express-

ing solidarity with workers internationally and emphatic protest against the plutocratic policy of «bayonets, bullets, police plots and wholesale disenfranchisements» was moved by William McNamara and seconded by Dr. Maloney. McNamara spoke against anarchists and for socialism, while Maloney said he himself was not an anarchist but deeply respected Kropotkin and Spencer, who were. (*Commonwealth and Workers Advocate*, organ of the trades and labour council, May 14, 1892).

Reports of unemployed agitation in the winter of 1892 contain more mentions of grass-roots initiative than before, or later. Meals were cooked and served by the unemployed using a system of meal tickets. Women were far more prominent, held their own meetings, and overall the gap between the militant unemployed and the protectionist Trades Hall Council bureaucrats far more obvious. On the other hand May 1892 was the year in which reports of «anarchist outrages» overseas reached a new peak and the bogey-man of revolutionary violence took on new substance with the arrest and trial of the ambiguous Ravachol in France. Claims and counterclaims penetrated again into Australian media.

The coincidence of overt expressions of worker resolve on May 1, 1892 in Sydney and Melbourne with widespread outbursts of direct action in Europe clearly put great fear into local Tories, while providing them with their best weapons for counter-attack which in turn provided fuel for the suspicions about agent provocateurs. As in Melbourne, the Sydney May Day gatherings provided a forum for energetic motions and argument, or verbal revolution. Larry Petrie's motion, the first called on the daytime meeting organised by the Australian Socialist League, and boycotted by the Trades and Labour Council, to affirm the 1889 Paris resolution of the International Labour Congress suggesting May 1 should be celebrated throughout the world. The *Sydney Morning Herald* in reporting the gathering called the local speeches «Revolutionary» and gave the report over to cabled messages from Europe: «Extensive Precautions in Paris — The City in a State of Siege — The Shops Everywhere Closed — Extensive Military Precautions — Numerous Arrests of Anarchists». (*Sydney Morning Herald*, May 2 1892).

The *Bulletin* maintained its cynical, but anti-authoritary approach: «As matters stand at present, there have been about three genuine Anarchist plots discovered, and two of them were apparently fomented and created by government spies... Also several police officers have

“found bombs” in several places and been rewarded for their courage and vigilance, and so long as the rewards hold out, they will continue to discover bombs». (*Bulletin*, 7 May 1892).

Lawson wrote of «May Day in Europe» for this issue of the *Bulletin*. One verse runs: «This is not the petty struggle of a State against a State. / But a Universal Rising of the victims of the Great! / Here they come! / Oh! Here they Come! / They have lived, my God! and suffered in the cabin and the slum! / Here they Come!».

Whoever was writing the Sydney *Truth* editorials, that of May 1, 1892, a long piece called «Socialism and Anarchy», must feature in any collection of biased, irrational anti-anarchist polemics. It seriously holds that the police were probably paying people to betray socialism and that the most likely place to find such people was among those talking anarchy: «all ignorant and vicious people are Anarchists... (most) prisoners in gaol are Anarchists and most Anarchists who are not in gaol ought to be. Socialists properly speaking are, for the most part, radical social reformers; of a most extreme type, if you will, but nevertheless *peaceful Revolutionists*» (editors emphasis).

May Day since 1892 has had a very mixed history and even experienced breaks in its celebration from approximately 1900 to 1927 reflecting the defeat of the reform movement in the 1890's, and the watering down effects of parliamentary politics, Federation and the 1914-1918 War.

For me, May Day is not simply a reminder of the Eight-Hour Day or even State repression most clearly and relevantly exemplified for anarchists by the Haymarket Events. For me, May Day is a reminder of the struggle we still have in front of us: — the struggle to take back control of the definition and the telling of what anarchism actually is.